

State of the Church

Trends for 2025

with William Vanderbloemen

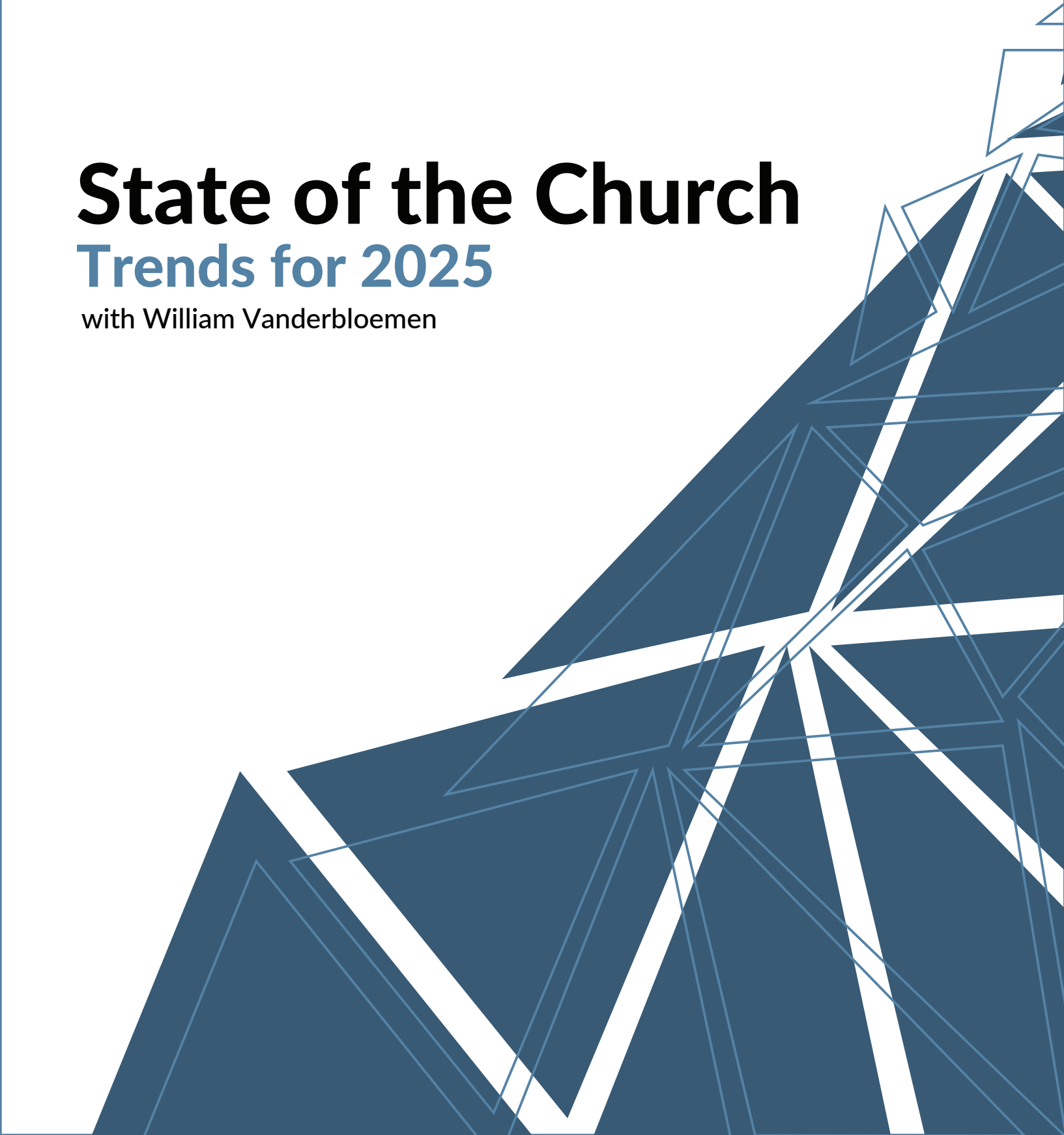




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Introduction

The number one question—by far—that I am asked wherever I go is:

“What is everyone doing out there?”

Pastoring a church requires so much attention and care, many pastors get bogged down in their own work and aren’t able to keep up with what the rest are doing.

We at Vanderbloemen have the opportunity to see the bigger picture. This year, we helped a record number of teams find their top talent, covering nearly every one of the **50 states** and expanding our international work into five new countries. I’m truly humbled to get to do this work and for the unique view it gives us into where church trends are headed.

Here is our *State of the Church: Trends for 2025*. It includes the top 10 trends I see coming for this year and, where applicable, the implications these trends will have on staffing.

So read on. If you see a trend that you think we should know or want to discuss, **email me!** I’d love to hear your thoughts on “what everyone is doing out there.” With that, Happy New Year! You have my best wishes and prayers for a record-breaking 2025 in your ministry.



People will be **more skeptical** of your preaching than ever.

I am predicting that the phrase “research shows” will become white noise in the near term.

Why?

Have you noticed how many articles on the web cite data and research lately? I love data. In fact, every book I’ve ever written is based on research that we’ve conducted. My most recent book, *Be The Unicorn*, is a direct result of long gathered and studied data.

However, the terms “the data shows” or “research shows” have become almost meaningless. If you don’t believe me, think back to the most recent presidential election. Both sides of the aisle were quoting research and data that shored up their own positions and platforms. The reality of our open source era is that research is cheap and easily malleable. Data can be made to say almost anything unless it is treated very carefully. People are catching onto this and are becoming more and more skeptical of opinions driven by “data.”

What does this mean for you?

If you’re preaching, you will need **more** research, not less. Make sure you research your data thoroughly from reputable sources. If you’re going to cite data, make sure it is not just from one point of view. Make sure you cite exactly where you found your research and cross check it with at least one more source.

One other phrase to implement in preaching that helps with this dynamic is to say: “Here’s what I’m learning,” rather than something along the lines of: “Here’s what you need to do.” It’s very hard for people to dispute your perspective or your learnings.

Finally, I’m noticing that the very best communicators are also the question askers. Asking a question requires zero data. Asking a good question can lead someone to deep transformation. By the way, the data shows that Jesus asked questions far more frequently than he gave out mandates.

People are more skeptical of “data” than ever. By asking questions, citing your own journey, and buttoning up your research, you will be able to mitigate skepticism about your preaching.

Understanding local context will become the signature of flourishing congregations.

Four years ago, we predicted that the highest value for congregational pastors in the next 10 years would be to know their context better than anyone else. That has proven true and appears to be a trend that is only going to increase. Now that the whole world is used to searching for content on demand, preaching is no longer a matter of providing the best sermon. Most pastors will never be able to compete with the extraordinarily gifted pastors that are nationally known and readily available online.

However, pastors who focus on their local context, meaning their particular zip code or two, have a chance to be experts in their local parish, which no national ministry can do. This is a huge opportunity for churches as they move forward in 2025. If you've seen any of the "For" campaigns ("For Houston," "For Nashville," "For Silicon Valley"), you can see that focusing on a local city leads to major ministry fruit. I cannot think of a great pastor I know who isn't deeply in love with their city.

What does this mean for your staffing? When interviewing, make sure that the person you're hiring can or will fall in love with your local context. If possible, hire those who are familiar with your area, culture, and beliefs. When we are doing searches, we implement what I call an "Acts 1:8" strategy. Jesus told his disciples to go local first (Jerusalem), then work outward (the ends of the earth). A good search for us starts by sourcing candidates locally, then moving outward.



Video will kill the radio star (and print).

Earlier this year, I was in a meeting with several of our Gen Z employees talking about launching our newest (and second) **podcast** and where we should focus on placing it. A few of them spoke up at the same time saying where they “watch” their podcasts.

I have never watched a podcast. Which I guess means I’m not Gen Z.

But what does this mean as a trend?

Video will run everything very soon. Many “studies are showing” that younger generations would rather watch an email message than read it. YouTube is now the number two search engine in the world (behind Google). Marketing firms have seen this coming and are encouraging people to include video and text in their emails to clients. We’re seeing smart churches start to implement both video and text in email updates.

What does this mean for staffing? If you don’t have someone on your team managing and creating video content regularly, you will be left behind in the coming year. How can you implement video in a way that makes sense? This will be different for each size church but should be a mandate for all churches.

Omnichannel communicators will win.

A few years back, we were asked to do a Chief Communications Officer (CCO) search for a very large church. The church is multigenerational and usually on the front-edge of innovation. Their main criteria for the new CCO was creating content that could be communicated in what we labeled as “omnichannel.” This individual needed to be able to work with every medium from old school printed bulletins all the way to TikTok.

What sounded novel and innovative a few years ago has now become the norm. We are seeing CCO positions rise in popularity among churches of lots of different sizes.

If you are not staffing in a way that allows your church communications to cross channels that reach all generations, then you are losing. Does this mean every pastor should open a TikTok account? Maybe. Maybe not.

At our office, I don't feel comfortable being a TikTok expert or trying to build that platform for myself. It just feels “weird” (to borrow my Gen Z kids' favorite adjective). Instead, we have a wonderful Gen Z team member who recently launched our **TikTok** account and manages our **Instagram**.

This team member is great because he's smart, but also because he has fluency for his generation. He then finds me and asks the old guy questions where I can offer things I've learned over the years. We film about six to ten of those every Friday, and that's my way of hitting a platform that a guy my age probably shouldn't be on.

That's just one way we are trying to engage in a new communication platform without being disingenuous. How can you engage across new platforms this year to reach multiple generations? How can you send a clear and consistent message across all platforms in your church? It may mean creating and hiring for a new role.



Staffing will continue to be **harder than ever (but not forever)**, and paying a firm to help hire will become more normal.

For those who haven't noticed, hiring is harder than ever. It's certainly the most difficult landscape I've seen in the 17 years I've been helping churches find their key leaders. There are a lot of data driven reasons for that, which we will focus on throughout our 2025 content. But what does that mean for you now?

Hiring is so difficult now because there was so much movement in 2021. Back at the end of 2020, **we predicted The Great Resignation** before it was a news headline. The turbulence that followed was unprecedented in the job market and churches were riding in the middle of it.

The net result is that a lot of people that moved in 2021 or 2022 are now settled in their current roles. They are also realizing that the grass is not always greener on the other side of the fence, making them hesitant to move to a new role. That trend will subside with time, once the ripples of The Great Resignation work themselves out.

Additionally, we're facing a crunch in the talent pool that is driven purely by birth rates from decades ago. Boomers continue to retire, which will persist for several more years. However, there are far fewer Gen Xers than there are Boomers (again, just by birth rate). There's a vast swath of Millennials and Gen Z's ready to step in, but many times the church is looking for someone with a little more maturity. That creates a crunch and a rush to hire the few people who are between 35 and 55 years old today.

What does that mean for you? **Hire an agency for your staffing.** Yes, that sounds salesy, but it is true. And it's more "normal" than ever. When I first started doing search 17 years ago, people thought it was at best strange and at worst a sign of weakness to outsource their hiring. Now, it's a best practice and has helped lots of churches move faster and farther with their team building.

Compensation increases will level off, but the best will get paid more.

Inflation was a key topic in the last election cycle, but many people forget that economic factors haven't just raised the price of eggs. They've raised the cost of staffing. Salary increases have been spiking lately. The number of churches requesting **compensation studies** is almost three times higher this year than years prior. Everyone seems to be struggling with higher wages and how much to pay in order to keep the best people and attract the best talent.

I believe that trend will continue for another year or two, but it is beginning to level off. Part of that leveling off is a result of finishing an election cycle, which almost always brings some kind of certainty to the economy—irrespective of who is elected. The spike in pay is also a direct ripple from The Great Resignation, which should also balance out with time.

Finally, we've been in an age where employees were determining where wages would sit. The pendulum between employees being in charge and employers being in charge has swung back and forth throughout the history of the U.S. economy. A whole lot of trends are showing me that the pendulum is swinging back toward the middle after being in a position where employees could dictate what they would like to be paid. So while wages may continue to rise in the next year, I don't think they will continue to spike much longer.

What does this mean for your staffing? I don't think you need to keep increasing base salaries as we have in the last few years. However, the question of benefits has become one of the leading questions in compensation.

From my point of view, Millennials and Gen Z's are at least as interested in what their benefits look like as they are in what their salaries can be. Part of this may be due to the fact that these generations are starting to form families and having children at later ages than generations prior. Consider giving your benefits an analysis and offering an increase in quality of life at work through them.

And as a bonus, consider a bonus structure. More to come on this later, but I believe that merit based pay in churches is a trend that's going to become normative in the near future.



Succession will continue to be a church crisis, but not forever.

It's hard to believe that it's been over 10 years since we started the research on pastoral succession that led to the book *Next: Pastoral Succession That Works*. Publishers thought we would hit a grand slam if we could sell 2,500 copies of that book. They guessed low. Now, five printings and an expanded edition later, we're seeing that the trend we predicted is even bigger than we suspected.

It won't end anytime soon. This is driven purely by demographics. It's happening to everyone in your congregation and across every industry they work in. Boomers are retiring. As stated above, there are very few Gen Xers to walk in behind and replace those Boomers. So churches are left with a dilemma of how to provide succession when the talent pool is much smaller.

(Bonus tip: mention this demographic shift at your next board meeting. I guarantee you every board member is facing the same thing you are in their industry. They'll relate, and think you're smart!)

Thankfully, the question and discussion surrounding succession has become one that is not taboo. When I first wrote the book *Next*, the entire goal for me was to move the succession conversation out of the parking lot and into the boardroom.

That thankfully has happened. Congregations are much more open about pastors, discipling and training younger generations to be ready to take over. Congregations are much more likely to begin an intentional process of setting an emergency succession plan and making a long-term plan. I don't just see this in sales of the book, I see it in the rapidly growing practice of *succession planning* that we are being hired for in all size churches.

Older pastors who lean into the future will be the Yoda everyone wants to learn from.

Good news for older pastors: you are now the cool kid on the block. Don't believe me? Ask a Millennial or Gen Z their favorite Star Wars character from the original movies. I bet they choose Yoda way before they choose a young Jedi.

Take a look at the football program at UNC Chapel Hill. They just fired the oldest coach in NCAA football. And they replaced him with... the newest, oldest coach in NCAA football, Bill Belichick.

Can no one who's young coach football anymore? Quite the contrary. But I believe there's a newfound respect for wizened leadership. It reminds me of the old adage: "Why is it that wisdom is wasted on the old and youth on the young?"

However, if you just decide to be old and not lean into future generations, you run the risk of being an old curmudgeon and not Yoda. The smartest pastors I see who are older are surrounding themselves with younger leaders, and not just giving them things to do.

As my friend Craig Groeschel has said for years, "If you give away tasks, you'll end up surrounded by doers. But if you give away authority, you'll end up surrounded by leaders." The smartest older pastors are finding ways to give away authority and lean into future generations. The unforeseen byproduct of that delegation is that they become a source of wisdom and a person that's looked up to rather than cast aside.

Staffing implication: Hire younger than you think you should. Then give away authority a little sooner than you're ready.

AI in church will be a tool, and not just a conversation.

I have a good friend at a major consulting firm, perhaps the best in the world, who recently told me about their experience with AI. They said to me, something like nine out of 10 of their clients are studying AI fervently right now. But only about five percent of them are actually doing anything with it.

This is not just a Silicon Valley conversation anymore. Your teenagers are being encouraged to use AI to help write homework assignments. Your congregation can probably write as good a sermon as you can by using AI. If you haven't started to pick up some of the tools that are out there, I'd suggest you find at least one or two in the coming year and be quite public about it.

A couple of suggestions? Check out the new AI functionality at [Logos](#) software. I recently received a sneak preview demo, and it's amazing what you can accomplish with the power of AI.

Will AI replace your job? I don't know. Maybe we're in the first part of a real life version of the old Terminator movie. If that happens, then we'll all be with Jesus very soon and there's nothing to worry about.

Kidding aside, the more likely scenario is not that you will be replaced by AI, but that you might be replaced by a human who knows how to use AI to his or her advantage. As I mentioned in the first point of this article, people are becoming more and more skeptical of randomly quoted data sources. I think people will become more and more skeptical of AI driven messages.

However, when the power of AI research is coupled with the discernment that pastors have, a powerful alchemy happens. My prediction is that your wisdom and historical knowledge will become more and more important, and will reach a new level of importance when you couple that wisdom with the technology breakthroughs that are happening today.

The “Gig Economy” will lose favor.

Years ago I was interviewing a pastor who was serving at an evangelical protestant church in Utah.

I asked him in our interview to tell me about his life. And then in sort of a tongue-in-cheek way, I said, “Tell me about your family. Tell me about your children. Tell me about all of your wives...”

He immediately responded,

“William the Bible is clear on this matter. Jesus said, ‘No man can serve two masters.’”

Funny story, but also true in employment. Employees are finally discovering that trying to serve two masters or two employers is more than twice as hard as serving one. The unsettled and distracted nature of the gig economy is becoming increasingly distasteful to employees. And employers are finding that it’s far more reasonable to pay a full-time employee very well, and then insist that this job be their only one.

The gig economy has been bubbling for quite a while. People have had all kinds of side hustles for years. But with the lockdowns four years ago, they reached the boiling point. Now I believe, the side hustle will become a distraction. Those who decide to be fully focused at their job will be paid better, will yield more fruit in their ministry, and enjoy a better life.

We have seen far too many instances where churches have discovered that their employees are also fully employed at some other job that doesn’t require them to be in an office. And when that happens, it’s not just a waste of money.

As an aside, that’s one of the hallmarks of our company. Each one of our consultants, recruiters, and every other team member is a full-time employee with no side hustle. Most of them have served in church ministry, so they know what it’s like.

But they are no longer required to give attention to a church and are freed up to focus their full attention on the searches they are executing for our clients. That’s been an expensive decision for us, but one that has proven to be very valuable to our clients, and has allowed us to do better work while serving more of the church.

Staffing application: Spend more money on fewer people.
Pay your best people well and insist you be their only job.

State of the Church

Conclusion

There are so many more trends we could cover here, but I've spent far too much time already. Look for more of what I'm seeing in the content we produce over the coming year and on our [podcast](#).

And as always, please let me learn from you! If you see trends, or want to share an interesting emerging shift you see in your church, [I'd love to discuss it](#).

I hope this helps you prepare for 2025 and gets you thinking a little differently. Thanks so much for all you do for the Church and for serving on the very front of the front lines of Team Jesus. Here at Vanderbloemen, we are all praying and pulling for you and are ready to serve you anytime you need.



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